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How Effective is License Suspension and Revocation?

Perhaps the most effective administrative means of reducing the incidence of crashes involving DWI offenders is through driver license suspension or revocation. Because loss of the driving privilege is the ultimate means to controlling problem drivers, license suspension has a significant impact upon persons directly affected and also provides general deterrence to others who fear having their own license suspended. Research in four States (Alabama, California, North Carolina, and Washington) has documented a highly significant effect from this most basic of driver improvement actions.

The effectiveness of this action sometimes is questioned since it is argued that (a) most of the target group continue to drive even after suspension and (b) this group is overrepresented in fatal traffic crashes when compared to the general driving population. Within limits, both are true. However, of those who do drive illegally, a majority claim to drive fewer miles and more carefully than before. Furthermore, some suspended drivers don't drive all. This results in zero crashes for this group, the same as if they had been jailed for the entire term of the suspension period.

Repeat DWI offenders should not be compared to the general driving population, but only to one another. On the whole their personal lives, living habits and social mores differ markedly from that of most drivers. Most of them may be classed as alcoholics or problem drinkers. For these persons, traffic fines or violator's schools have little, if any, positive impact. However, the loss of license has been shown to result in statistically significant reductions in traffic crashes and violations, and it has been suggested that a closer relationship between driver licensing and State health and social services may result in an even greater payoff.

During the 1970's, the California DMV undertook a series of studies on the effectiveness of licensing sanctions against convicted DWIs. One 1977 study involved the comparison of two groups of drivers with multiple DWI convictions. One group received a mandated licensing suspension or revocation while the other group did not receive the mandated sanction (they avoided the action by having their prior convictions voided by the courts). Both groups received traditional jail sentences or fines. The study found that the group that had their